

A subjective distance between stimuli: quantifying the metric structure of representations

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Abstract

As subjects perceive the sensory world, different stimuli elicit a number of neural representations. Here, a subjective distance between stimuli is defined, measuring the degree of similarity between the underlying representations. As an example, the subjective distance between different locations in space is calculated from the activity of rodent's hippocampal place cells, and lateral septal cells. Such a distance is compared to the real distance, between locations. As the number of sampled neurons increases, the subjective distance shows a tendency to resemble the metrics of real space.

1 How different are two stimuli perceived?

Consider a subject that is labeling the elements of a given set of stimuli $S = \{s^1, s^2, \dots, s^N\}$. Every time a stimulus $s^j \in S$ is shown, he or she identifies it as $s^k \in S$, where j may or may not be equal to k . Successful

trials are those where the stimulus is correctly identified, that is, when $j = k$. By writing down the succession of presented stimuli, and in each case, the response of the subject, one can build up a list of pairs (s^j, s^k) , where the first element, s^j , is the real stimulus, and the second one, s^k , is the choice made by the subject.

Notice that by looking into the table, one cannot determine precisely what the subject actually perceived, since only the final choice s_k is accessible. The subject may, in fact, hesitate to identify the stimulus as a member of S , or even think that it does not truly match any of the s^i . However, even if the mental representation elicited by stimulus s^j is unknown, the experimentalist can assess that under the requirement to classify the stimulus as an element of S , the subject chooses s^k . In a way, whatever the neural activity brought about by s^j , out of all the elements in S , the one whose representation is most similar to the actual one, is s^k . The object of the present work is to provide a quantitative measure of such a criterion of similarity. The approach does not rely on a model of mental representations, it only makes use of the statistics of actual and chosen stimuli.

In what follows, we assume that a sufficiently large number of samples has been taken, so that the conditional probability $Q(s^k|s^j)$ of showing s^j and perceiving s^k may be evaluated, for all j and all k . The matrix Q is henceforth called the *confusion matrix*. The elements of matrix Q are positive numbers, ranging from 0 to 1. In addition, normalization must hold,

$$\sum_k Q(s^k|s^j) = 1. \quad (1)$$

It should be noticed that Q need not be symmetric. For any fixed j , one can define an N -dimensional vector \mathbf{q}^j such that its k -th component is equal to $Q(s^k|s^j)$. The positivity of the elements of Q and the normalization condition Eq. (1) determine a domain \mathcal{D} , where \mathbf{q}^j can live. It is a finite portion of a hyperplane of dimension $N - 1$. Figure 1 depicts the domain \mathcal{D} for $N = 3$.

For some sets of stimuli, the confusion matrix may show clustering. That is, choosing a convenient ordering of the stimuli, Q may show a block structure, where cross elements between stimuli belonging to different blocks are always zero. In this case, the stimuli belonging to different blocks are never confounded with one another. Moreover, they are never confounded with a third common stimulus. The phenomenon of clustering exposes a very particular structure perceived by the subject in the set of stimuli.

In this work, we are interested in studying the statistics of mistakes. More

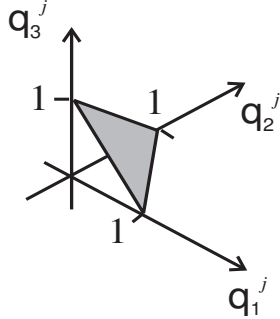


Figure 1: Domain \mathcal{D} where the vector \mathbf{q}_j can exist, when $N = 3$.

specifically, if the subject happens to systematically confound, for example, two of the stimuli, it could be argued that from his or her subjective point of view, those two stimuli are particularly similar. We would like to quantify such an amount of similarity by introducing a distance between stimuli. This distance, being defined with the statistics of mistakes, is of course subjective.

It may happen that in a particular experiment, the subjective distance between stimuli can actually be explained in terms of some physical parameter qualifying the stimuli (orientation angle, pitch, colour, etc). But it could also happen that the subjective metric structure had no physical correlate in the stimuli themselves, but instead depended on the previous semantic knowledge of the subject, or on the presence or absence of distractors, or on the statistical distribution with which the stimuli are presented, or on the attention being paid by the subject. The aim, hence, of defining a subjective distance between stimuli, is to provide a quantitative measure that may serve to determine the degree up to which these different processes—if present—contribute to the confusion of some stimuli with others, or, in contrast, to their clear differentiation.

In order to define a distance between stimuli, it is necessary to have a notion of equality. Here, two stimuli i and j are considered subjectively equal if $\mathbf{q}^i = \mathbf{q}^j$. That is, if for all k , $Q(s^k|s^i) = Q(s^k|s^j)$. Hence, in the notion of equality not only the way stimulus i is confounded with stimulus j is relevant. One must also compare the way each of those two stimuli are confounded with the rest of the elements in set S . If one of them is perceived

as very similar to a third stimulus k , but the other is not, then a noticeable difference between i and j can be pointed out, and the stimuli cannot be considered subjectively equal.

The equality of \mathbf{q}^i and \mathbf{q}^j , in addition, is not equivalent to a high confusion probability, between the two of them. If stimulus i is always perceived as stimulus j and vice versa, then—taking s^i and s^j as representing the first and second components, respectively, in the \mathbf{q} vectors— $(\mathbf{q}^i)^t = (0, 1, 0, \dots, 0)$, whereas $(\mathbf{q}^j)^t = (1, 0, 0, \dots, 0)$. In this case, the two stimuli are perfectly distinguishable from one another. The fact that the subject chooses to label stimulus i as j (and vice versa) does not mean he or she makes confusion between them. It is only a question of names. Correspondingly, it may happen that two stimuli are never confounded with one another, and yet they are equal. This happens when $Q(s^i|s^j) = Q(s^j|s^i) = Q(s^i|s^i) = Q(s^j|s^j) = 0$, and in addition, $Q(s^k|s^i) = Q(s^k|s^j)$, for all k different from i and j .

Starting from the notion of subjective equality, in the next section a number of desirable properties of a subjective distance are discussed. Out of all the distances that fulfill these requirements, a single one is selected, in section 3. Next, in section 4, the relationship of our subjective distance to other measures of similarity is discussed. Section 5 extends the definition of subjective distance to the case where the response of the subject is given as a neural pattern of activity. In section 6 an example is presented, using extracellular recordings from the rodent hippocampus and lateral septum. Finally, in section 7, a brief summary of the main ideas and results is given.

2 Properties of a subjective distance

What are the desirable properties of a subjective distance? First, since the distance D between elements i and j is intended to reflect the statistics of confusions upon presentation of these two stimuli, it is convenient to define it in terms of the vectors \mathbf{q}^i and \mathbf{q}^j . As a distance, it is required to fulfill the following conditions:

1. $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) \geq 0$, and $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = 0 \Leftrightarrow \mathbf{q}^i = \mathbf{q}^j$.
2. D is symmetric: $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = D(\mathbf{q}^j, \mathbf{q}^i)$.
3. D obeys the triangle inequality: $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) + D(\mathbf{q}^j, \mathbf{q}^k) \geq D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^k)$.

These are general requirements, defining a distance. The third condition implies that the set of \mathbf{q} vectors that lie all at the same distance of one particular \mathbf{q}^i conform a convex figure, in the domain \mathcal{D} .

In addition, in the present case, the distance between two elements should not depend on the ordering of the stimuli. Hence, if the components k and ℓ are interchanged, in both \mathbf{q}^i and \mathbf{q}^j , the distance $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j)$ should remain invariant. That is, if $C^{k\ell}$ is a matrix that interchanges the k -th and ℓ -th component, then

$$4. D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = D(C^{k\ell}\mathbf{q}^i, C^{k\ell}\mathbf{q}^j).$$

This requirement, though plainly obvious from the intuitive point of view, imposes quite serious restrictions. Consider, for example, all the distances $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j)$ that can be derived from a scalar product \langle, \rangle , namely, $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = \sqrt{\langle \mathbf{q}^i - \mathbf{q}^j, \mathbf{q}^i - \mathbf{q}^j \rangle}$. Once an orthonormal basis is given, this may be written as $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = \sqrt{(\mathbf{q}^i - \mathbf{q}^j)^t M (\mathbf{q}^i - \mathbf{q}^j)}$, where M is any hermitian, positive definite matrix representing the scalar product. Condition 4 imposes symmetry among the components of the vectors, which means that M must be proportional to the unit matrix. Therefore, out of all the distances that have a scalar product associated to them, the only one that fulfills condition 4 is the Euclidean distance—apart from a scale factor, fixing the units.

What should be the meaning of the maximum subjective distance? The maximum distance should be reserved to those pairs of objects which the subject distinguishes unambiguously from one another: that is, to those s^i and s^j that are never confounded with a common stimulus. Mathematically, this means that for each k , either $Q(s^k|s^i)$ or $Q(s^k|s^j)$ (or both) must vanish. That is, whenever $Q(s^k|s^i) \neq 0$, $Q(s^k|s^j) = 0$ (and vice versa). In this case, whatever the response of the subject to stimulus s^i , it never coincides with his or her response to stimulus s^j . This situation corresponds to the intuitive notion of unambiguous segregation: the response of the subject to stimulus i is enough to ensure that the stimulus was *not* j . And vice versa, the response to stimulus j is enough to discard stimulus i .

The fifth requirement, hence, reads

5. if $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j)$ is maximal if and only if s^i and s^j are unambiguously segregated. And conversely, if $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j)$ is not maximal, then s^i and s^j are not unambiguously segregated.

Imposing requirement 5 ensures that the stimuli that are unambiguously segregated are all at the same distance, no matter any other particular char-

acteristic of the stimuli. And conversely, if two stimuli do not elicit segregated responses, they are not allowed to be at the maximum distance. Condition 5 establishes the cases that correspond to the maximum distance, in the same way that condition 1 does to the minimum distance. Adding the triangular inequality 3, ensures that those pairs of stimuli whose distance lies in between of the minimal and the maximal one, be consistently ordered.

Condition 5 has two important consequences. In the first place, it ensures that the clustering structure present in Q is also reflected in the matrix of distances D . In D , of course, cross terms between different blocks are not equal to zero, but to the maximum distance. Conversely, if D shows a block structure, it may be shown that Q has the same block structure. In the second place, if the maximum distance is finite, a similarity matrix S may be defined, $S = d_M I - D$, where d_M is the maximum distance, and I , the unit matrix. The matrix S also inherits, if present, the clustering structure of Q . This correspondence between the clustering structure of D (and of S) with the one of Q cannot be ensured, if condition 5 is not fulfilled.

The Euclidean distance $D_E(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = \sqrt{\sum_k (q_k^i - q_k^j)^2}$ does not fulfill condition 5. Taking into account that the \mathbf{q} vectors are normalized (Eq. 1), the maximum value of the Euclidean distance between two stimuli is $\sqrt{2}$. It can be attained, for example, for $(\mathbf{q}^1)^t = (1, 0, 0, 0)$ and $(\mathbf{q}^2)^t = (0, 1, 0, 0)$. In this example, in fact, stimulus 1 shares no common response with stimulus 2. However, not all stimuli with no common responses lie at the maximum Euclidean distance. Consider, for example, $(\mathbf{q}^3)^t = (1/2, 1/2, 0, 0)$ and $(\mathbf{q}^4)^t = (0, 0, 1/2, 1/2)$. Though showing disjoint response sets, their Euclidean distance is equal to 1, which is less than the maximum distance. This means that none of the distances that can be associated to a scalar product are useful, as a measure of subjective dis-similarity.

3 Choosing a subjective distance

There are still many distances fulfilling requirements 1 - 5. In what follows, a single one is selected, on the basis of a maximum likelihood decoding. Imagine that someone observing the subject's responses to either stimulus i or j has to guess which of the two has been presented. For the moment, for simplicity we assume that both stimuli appear with the same frequency; this requirement will be abandoned later on. We assume the observer is familiar with the confusion matrix of the subject. There are several ways

in which he or she can decide between stimuli i and j , given the subject's response. Here, a maximum likelihood strategy is considered, since this is the algorithm that maximizes the fraction of stimuli correctly identified. It consists of taking the choice of the subject - say, stimulus k - and deciding whether the actual stimulus was i or j on the basis of which of them has the largest \mathbf{q}_k component. If $Q(s^k|s^i) > Q(s^k|s^j)$, the observer chooses stimulus i , if the opposite holds, the observer chooses stimulus j . If both conditional probabilities are equal, then the observer chooses any of the two stimuli, with equal probabilities.

Under this scheme, the fraction of times the observer correctly identifies stimulus i is

$$P(s^i|s^i) = \sum_{k/q_k^i > q_k^j} q_k^i + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k/q_k^i = q_k^j} q_k^i. \quad (2)$$

The fraction of times stimulus j is presented, but the observer chooses stimulus i is

$$P(s^i|s^j) = \sum_{k/q_k^i > q_k^j} q_k^j + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k/q_k^i = q_k^j} q_k^i. \quad (3)$$

Correspondingly, when the observer decides for stimulus j

$$P(s^j|s^j) = \sum_{k/q_k^j > q_k^i} q_k^j + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k/q_k^i = q_k^j} q_k^j. \quad (4)$$

$$P(s^j|s^i) = \sum_{k/q_k^j > q_k^i} q_k^i + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k/q_k^i = q_k^j} q_k^j. \quad (5)$$

The distance $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j)$ is defined as the difference between the fraction of correct and incorrect maximum likelihood choices, namely,

$$\begin{aligned} D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) &= \frac{1}{2} [P(s^i|s^i) - P(s^i|s^j)] + \frac{1}{2} [P(s^j|s^j) - P(s^j|s^i)] \\ &= \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k=1}^N |q_k^i - q_k^j|. \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

In other words, the distance between stimulus i and stimulus j is defined in terms of the performance of the maximum likelihood decoding, assuming that the response statistics of the subject are known. This definition is easily shown to fulfill all 1-5 conditions. A distance equal to zero means that the observer is deciding at chance, between the two stimuli. Given that he uses

a maximum likelihood strategy, that means that the two underlying vectors are equal. A distance equal to 1 implies that the observer always makes the right choice.

In what follows, some mathematical properties of the distance D are analyzed. In order to get a geometric flavor of D , figure 2 shows a contour

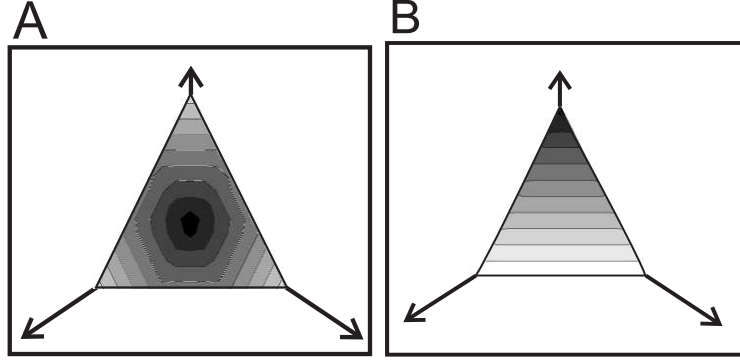


Figure 2: Contour plot of the distance D to a fixed vector \mathbf{q}^i , in \mathcal{D} . (a) $\mathbf{q}^i = (1/3, 1/3, 1/3)$, and (b), $\mathbf{q}^i = (1, 0, 0)$

plot of the distance of all the vectors in \mathcal{D} to the vectors $(1/3, 1/3, 1/3)$, in (A), and $(0, 0, 1)$, in (B).

The subjective distance D is translation invariant. That is, if the vectors \mathbf{q}^i and \mathbf{q}^j are displaced by a fixed vector $\Delta\mathbf{q}$, the distance between them remains unchanged. Mathematically,

$$D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = D(\mathbf{q}^i + \Delta\mathbf{q}, \mathbf{q}^j + \Delta\mathbf{q}). \quad (7)$$

Equation (7) is valid for any displacement $\Delta\mathbf{q}$. However, in the present context, the displacement should be such that $\mathbf{q}^i + \Delta\mathbf{q}$ and $\mathbf{q}^j + \Delta\mathbf{q}$ fall both inside the domain \mathcal{D} . This means that the components of $\Delta\mathbf{q}$ must sum up to zero, and its magnitude must be bounded (the value of the bound depends on the location of \mathbf{q}^i and \mathbf{q}^j).

As a further characterization, the distance D between a stimulus that is perfectly identified by the subject - say, stimulus i - and another stimulus j , is given. We take $(\mathbf{q}^i)^t = (1, 0, 0, \dots, 0)$. In this case, $D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = \sum_{k=2}^N q_k^j = 1 - q_1^j$. The distance between \mathbf{q}^i and \mathbf{q}^j is fully determined by q_1^j , it does not

matter whether the probability of *not* selecting stimulus 1 is spread out over the last $N - 1$ components of \mathbf{q}^j , or is entirely concentrated in a single one. This result generalizes to any vector \mathbf{q}^i having two or more null components: the distance depends on the sum of those same components of \mathbf{q}^j , and not on their individual values.

Finally, consider the case where the subject has a probability α of identifying any of the stimuli correctly ($Q(s^i|s^i) = \alpha$), and that whenever he or she makes a mistake, the error is equally distributed among all other stimuli ($Q(s^i|s^j) = \beta$, for all $i \neq j$). The normalization condition Eq. (1) implies $\alpha + (N - 1)\beta = 1$. In this case, $D(s^i, s^j) = |\alpha - \beta|$.

3.1 Extension to continuous stimuli

Consider the case where there is a continuous parameter x labeling the stimuli, such that stimulus i corresponds to an interval of x values ranging from $i\Delta$ to $(i+1)\Delta$, with $\Delta = 1/N$. It is now convenient to vary i between 0 and $N - 1$. The scale of x is chosen in such a way that its maximum value is 1. For large N , the confusion matrix can be written as $Q(s^j|s^i) = u(j\Delta|s^i)\Delta$, where $u(x|s^i)$ is a piecewise continuous probability density. The distance between stimuli i and j reads

$$D(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = \frac{1}{2} \sum_k |u(k\Delta|s^i) - u(k\Delta|s^j)| \Delta \rightarrow \frac{1}{2} \int_0^1 |u(x|s^i) - u(x|s^j)| dx, \quad (8)$$

where the right hand limit corresponds to making the number of stimuli N tend to infinity. In other words, the distance between stimuli i and j is equal to the area between the two corresponding densities. The normalization condition for $u(x|s)$ ensures that D lies between 0 and 1. One can easily show that its value remains invariant, when a different parametrization of the variable x is used—as long as the new variable is in a one to one relation to x .

3.2 Extension to stimuli with non uniform prior probabilities

One could ask whether the measure D can be extended to stimuli which are not all presented with the same probability. Let $Q(s^i)$ denote the probability of presenting stimulus s^i . In this case, the maximum likelihood al-

gorithm has to be substituted by a maximum a posteriori one. That is, the observer chooses stimulus s^i upon response s^k from the subject, whenever $p_k^i = Q(s^k|s^i)Q(s^i)$ is larger than $p_k^j = Q(s^k|s^j)Q(s^j)$, and vice versa. Whenever the $p_k^i = p_k^j$, the choice between s^i and s^j is proportional to their corresponding priors. In this case, the difference between the correct and incorrect fractions of maximum likelihood estimations is

$$D_0(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j) = \frac{1}{Q(s^j) + Q(s^i)} \sum_k |p_k^i - p_k^j|. \quad (9)$$

This is, of course, also a valid distance between stimuli, since it fulfills requirements 1 - 5. Its maximum value is also 1, and it still carries the same block structure as Q . Notice that in this case, the distance not only depends on the subject's perception—characterized by $Q(s^j|s^i)$ —but also on the statistics of the stimuli (described by $Q(s^i)$).

4 Comparison with other measures of dissimilarity

The distance D_0 is no more than a geometrical view of the matrix $Q(s^i, s^j)$. It has the advantage of being true distance, that is, of obeying conditions 1 - 3, of section 1. In addition, it fulfills the symmetry constraints imposed by condition 4, and preserves the block structure in Q , as ensured by condition 5. However, there are also other distances that still obey requirements 1-5, the angle between the vectors \mathbf{q}_i and \mathbf{q}_j can be taken as an example. The advantage of D_0 is that it has a simple interpretation in terms of maximum likelihood decoding performance.

There have been previous attempts aiming at quantifying how different two stimuli are perceived. Maybe the most similar to ours was proposed by Green and Swets (1966), in their definition of the discriminability d' between two stimuli. Strictly speaking, their approach can only be used when the response to different stimuli is described by Gaussian functions whose mean depends on the stimulus, but whose variance remains fixed. They defined the discriminability d' between two stimuli as the ratio between the difference of the two corresponding mean values to the standard deviation.

Can the concept of d' be extended to more general response distributions? Still in the Gaussian case, one can make a correspondence between a given d' value, and the expected fraction of errors when estimating the stimulus

from the response of the subject, using a maximum likelihood decoding. In terms of this correspondence, d' not only represents the distance at which the Gaussian functions sit from one another, but more generally, the fraction of decoding mistakes—which is something that does not depend on the shape of the probability distribution of the responses of the subject. Large discriminability is associated to a small probability of making a mistake. The scale of the measure, however, since inherited from the Gaussian case, has a non linear relationship with the fraction of mistakes.

With this idea in mind, d' can be extended to non Gaussian stimuli (Rieke, Warland, de Ruyter van Steveninck, and Bialek, 1997). Whatever the shape of $P(s^k|s^i)$ and $P(s^k|s^j)$, given the response s^k , an observer can decide in favor of stimulus s^i or s^j depending on which of them has a highest probability of eliciting response s^k . For each pair of stimuli s^i and s^j there will be, on average, a certain fraction f_e of errors. One could extend the definition of discriminability to be the d' value that would give, in the Gaussian case, the same fraction f_e of errors. This extension, being intimately related to the performance of a maximum likelihood decoding, is grounded on the same rationale as our subjective distance D . The problem is that if one is constrained to choose the d' scale as to match the equivalent Gaussian case, then the definition of discriminability does not obey the triangular inequality. It is easy to construct an example where $P(s^k|s^i)$ overlaps in certain region with $P(s^k|s^j)$, which in turn, overlaps in a different region with $P(s^k|s^\ell)$, but such that $P(s^k|s^i)$ and $P(s^k|s^\ell)$ are never simultaneously different from zero. In this case, $d'(s^i, s^j)$ and $d'(s^j, s^\ell)$ are both finite, whereas $d'(s^i, s^\ell)$ is infinite. Hence, though both D and d' can be defined in terms of maximum likelihood performance, D is a proper distance, whereas d' is not.

Another well known notion of distance can be defined (for continuous stimuli) in terms of the Fisher information metric tensor J . There is a natural scalar product associated with J , and also a notion of distance in the space of stimuli (see Amari 1999). However, the entire Fisher geometry becomes meaningless for discrete stimuli. Our aim is to show that even in the discrete case, a definition of distance is possible.

The distance defined in terms of the Fisher metric tensor is a bilinear form. Its matrix elements are not constant, but depend on the point \mathbf{q} that one is interested in. Hence, distances are defined in terms of a curvilinear integral—which may actually involve very difficult calculations. When two stimuli have disjoint response sets, the Fisher distance between them diverges. However, a Fisher distance between two stimuli equal to infinity does not necessarily

imply that the responses to those two stimuli conform disjoint sets. The Fisher distance between two stimuli may diverge, for example, when the probability density $u(x|s)$ is discontinuous. This implies a discrepancy with requirement 5.

The Kullback-Leibler divergence (Cover and Thomas, 1991) between the vectors \mathbf{q}^i and \mathbf{q}^j can also be used to measure how different two stimuli are perceived. It has the appealing property of being intimately related to many concepts in information theory, and as such, it has an information based intuitive interpretation: it is a measure (in number of additional bits of the mean code length) of the inefficiency of assuming that the distribution of a given variable is \mathbf{q}^i when its true distribution is \mathbf{q}^j . It is not a distance, however, since it does not fulfill requirements 2 - 3. Its symmetrized version is sometimes called the Jensen-Shannon measure, which is still not a distance, because it does not obey the triangular inequality 3. For this measure, condition 4 is always true. The maximum value of the Jensen-Shannon divergence is infinite. This value, however, is not only reached for pairs of stimuli whose response sets are disjoint, but also whenever there is a component k such that $q_k^i = 0$, and $q_k^j \neq 0$. This means requirement 5 is not, in general, fulfilled.

There has been another previous proposal of a pseudo-distance (Treves, 1997), which was also defined in terms of the confusion matrix. As opposed to D_0 , and also to the Jensen-Shannon measure, the distance between stimuli s^i and s^j only depends on $Q(s^i|s^j)$, $Q(s^j|s^i)$, $Q(s^i|s^i)$ and $Q(s^j|s^j)$, (other stimuli do not appear). Just as the Jensen-Shannon divergence, however, it does not fulfill requirements 3 and 5.

We claim that our measure allows to have a geometrical picture of a set of stimuli. Multidimensional scaling (Young and Ham 1994, Cox and Cox 2000) also aims at this goal. The two approaches, however, bear certain differences, which are now discussed. The use of D_0 aims at a definition of a distance. It is particularly useful when one can vary a certain parameter in the experiment (in the example below, the number of cells being sampled) and wants to know the effect of that parameter in the structure of confusions. Nevertheless, D_0 in itself does not provide a way of visualizing the stimuli in a particular space. Since the structure of confusions may depend on a very large number of factors (as for example, the semantic knowledge of the subject), there may be, actually, no small dimensional space where the stimuli can be placed.

Multidimensional scaling, in contrast, starts with a given matrix of distances, or dis-similarities. The algorithm is designed to place the stimuli in

a finite dimensional space producing the minimum possible distortion of the pairwise distances. Except for very particular sets of stimuli, it is an approximate method. What is gained is the optimal set of coordinates of the stimuli, out of the matrix of distances. The subjective distance could be, in certain applications, a good starting point with which to feed the multidimensional scaling algorithm.

Finally, we point out that our definition of subjective distance makes special emphasis in the probability of confounding the stimuli, as opposed to other possible measures, that stress the differences in the elicited neural representations. In this sense, our approach is, broadly speaking, complementary to Victor and Purpura’s (1997) proposal of constructing a metric in the set of responses. There, different distances between spike trains were considered. Each proposed distance captured specific aspects of the neural response. For example, the distance between two spike trains was either defined in terms of how different the timing of individual spikes were, or how different the inter-spike intervals were, and so forth. Their aim was to decide which of those distances could better cluster the neural responses corresponding to the different stimuli in their set, and in such a way, to make inferences about the way stimuli were encoded into spike trains. In the back of this reasoning is the assumption that the stimuli themselves are all sufficiently different from one another. Here, in contrast, we are interested in the perceived distances and similarities of the stimuli, as can be deduced from the structure of confusions.

5 From neural representations to the subjective distance

In order to use the distances defined in section 3, the conditional probabilities $Q(s^i|s^j)$ are needed. Such probabilities may be extracted, as described in section 1, from an experiment where the subject is asked to identify the stimuli. However, this is not the only way a matrix Q can be obtained. In the case of non human subjects, many times the stimuli are presented while the activity of one or several neurons is being recorded by microelectrodes implanted into the animal’s brain. From these experiments, the conditional probability $\rho(r^k|s^j)$ of recording response r^k upon presentation of stimulus s^j may be calculated.

One way of deriving Q from ρ is to use a decoding procedure. That is, to define a mapping going from the set of neural responses to the set of stimuli (Rolls and Treves, 1998; Dayan and Abbot, 2001; Rieke, Warland, de Ruyter van Steveninck, and Bialek, 1997). Different rules defining such a transformation give rise to different decoding procedures. Among them, one can point out the maximum a posteriori decoding, where r^k is associated to the stimulus which maximizes $\rho(s^j|r^k) = \rho(r^k|s^j)P(s^j)/\sum_\ell \rho(r^k|s^\ell)P(s^\ell)$, that is, the conditional probability of having presented stimulus s^j when response r^k was measured. This rule is, among all possible decoding rules, the one that maximizes the fraction of correct decodings.

Another widely used option is the Bayesian approach, where

$$Q(s^j|s^i) = \sum_k \rho(s^j|r^k)\rho(r^k|s^i). \quad (10)$$

Strictly speaking, in this case there is no decoding, since one does not choose a single stimulus for each response. One rather keeps all the probability distribution for each stimulus, given the neural response. The only assumption in the back of Eq. (10) is that the decoded stimulus is conditionally independent of the actual stimulus, that is $P(s^j|r^k, s^i) = P(s^j|r^k)P(r^k|s^i)$.

Passing from matrix ρ to matrix Q always means a loss of information. The amount of information that is lost can sometimes be estimated (Samengo, 2001). A maximum a posteriori decoding maximizes the fraction of correct identifications (that is, the trace f of the resulting Q) but probably loses some of the structure of ρ , whenever the response r^j is not the most probable response elicited by a given stimulus. A procedure like Eq. (10) is intended to preserve the statistical regularities of mistakes, but typically implies a lower fraction of correct choices f . Therefore, whenever neural responses are used to construct matrix Q , one must bear in mind that the results depend, at least partially, on the way of calculating Q .

The dependence of the Q matrix on the decoding may seem perhaps dangerous. Could one define a distance in terms of ρ , without having to pass through matrix Q ? Of course this is possible, in general terms. One option, for example, would be to calculate the mean response \mathbf{m}^i to stimulus i , and then define the distance between stimuli i and j as the distance D_n between the corresponding means¹. This is a distance between vectors living in the response set, not in \mathcal{D} . The sub-index n , hence, stands for *neural*.

¹Of course, even more sophisticated distances are possible, for example, one taking into account the covariance matrix, or even higher moments of the distributions $\rho(r^k|s^i)$.

The distance D_n may be a sensible approach when one is interested in the neural representations of the stimuli. It is not very convenient, however, if the distance is meant to reflect the structure of confusions. As is shown below, D_n does not, in general, fulfill condition 5.

In the entire subject, confusions are defined at the behavioral level: the subject is asked to identify the stimuli. At the neural level, one can only talk about confusion between two stimuli when a decoding procedure is introduced. In this sense, the process of decoding should not be viewed as an arbitrary step: one shifts the question of how distinguishable two stimuli are, to the problem of inferring the stimulus from the neural response.

To test whether a distance defined in the response set fulfills condition 5, we point out that for any reasonable decoding procedure, two stimuli that elicit responses occupying convex, non overlapping, portions of the response space are never confounded with one another. Is this enough to have them at the maximum D_n ? In general, no. Being D_n defined in terms of a distance in the response set, the more separate the responses to the two stimuli, the larger D_n . Hence, neural based distances do not, in general, fulfill condition 5.

6 Application to place cells: comparing the actual and the subjective distance between two locations in space

It is known that many of the pyramidal cells in the rodent hippocampus selectively fire when the animal is in a particular location of its environment (O’Keefe and Dostrovsky, 1971). Such a response profile allows one to define, for each cell, a *place field*, that is, the region in space for which the neuron is responsive. A classical experiment in the study of the rat’s hippocampal neurophysiology consists in letting the awake animal wander in a given environment, while the activity of one or several of its hippocampal pyramidal cells is being recorded (for an overview see, for example, O’Keefe (1971), or Redish (2000)). In the experiment we analyze next, cells in the lateral septum have also been recorded. The lateral septum receives a massive pro-

Here, we only use a very simple definition of a distance D_n in the response space, since we only want to point out that there is a qualitative difference between defining a distance in terms of the Q matrix and in terms of the ρ matrix.

jection from hippocampal pyramidal neurons, the activity of septal cells has also been shown to be informative about the location of the animal, though not as neat as in hippocampal neurons.

The set of stimuli, in this case, consists of all the possible locations where the animal can be placed. This set is endowed with a natural metric: we all know what the distance between two locations is. Other sets of stimuli, for example a set of pictures of human faces, lack an obvious, natural distance. In order to test our definition of subjective distance, it is convenient to work with a metric set of stimuli, which allows the comparison of D_0 with the natural *physical* distance in the set.

A description of the experiment follows. Nine young adult Long-Evans rats were tested while moving in an 8 arm radial maze, as shown in figure 3 (A).

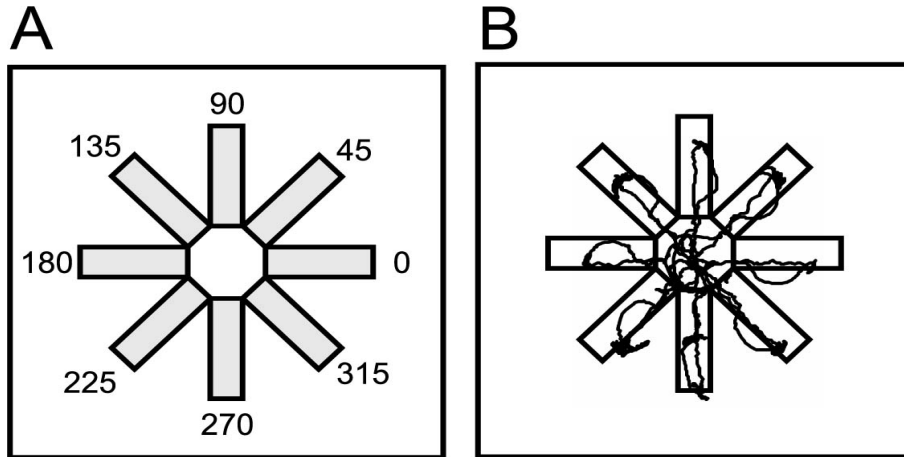


Figure 3: (A) Eight arm maze where the animals move. (B) Path traveled by a rat, in a given trial, as measured by the diode on its head. The rat goes straight to the end of the arm, and drinks the chocolate milk. When turning round, it typically sweeps its head in a circular movement, peeping outside the maze.

Each arm contained a small amount of chocolate milk in its distal part (for details see Leutgeb and Mizumori, (2000)). In a given trial, a rat initially placed in the center of the maze, visited the eight arms in a random order (see the example of figure 3 (B)) taking the food reward. Several trials

were recorded per animal, sometimes in darkness and sometimes in light conditions. Septal and hippocampal cells were simultaneously registered while the animal moved on the maze. Single units were separated using an on-line and off-line separation software. Units were then classified according to their anatomical location and the characteristics of the spikes. Hippocampal pyramidal cells and lateral septal cells were identified. In what follows, each arm of the maze is taken as a different stimulus, and it is labeled by its angle, as in figure 3 (A). The center of the maze was excluded, so as to have eight similar, and evenly visited stimuli. Thus, in the present experiment the physical distance between any two stimuli is the (actual) angle between the corresponding arms. The subjective distance is deduced from the responses.

As an example, in figure 4 the location of the animal is shown, whenever

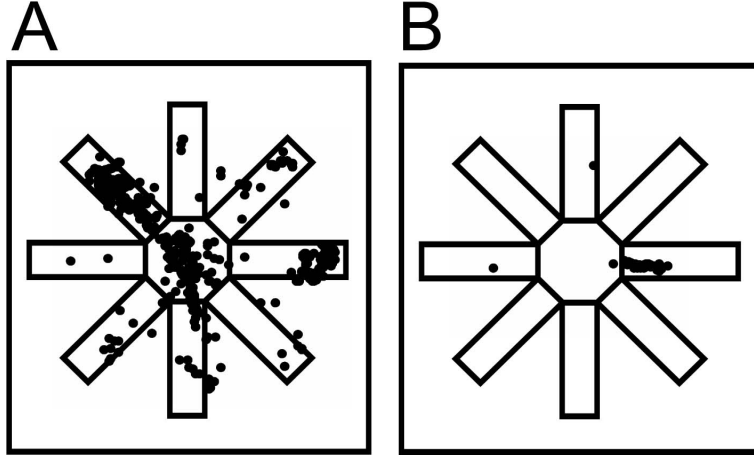


Figure 4: Location of the animal when (A) a given lateral septal and (B) a hippocampal pyramidal neuron fired a spike. The dots that fall outside the maze indicate that the nose of the animal is peeping outside the walls of the labyrinth.

(A) a lateral septal, and (B) a hippocampal place cell fire a spike. It is clear that both cells fire selectively when the animal is in a particular location on the maze, the septal cell having a somewhat more distributed response.

The decoding procedure and the calculation of the Q matrix was carried out first for a single neuron, and then for pairs, triplets and sets of 4 cells measured simultaneously. The response of the animal was, correspondingly,

a scalar, or a 2, 3 and 4 dimensional vector \mathbf{r} , where the component r_c stands for the firing rate of cell c . Hence, upon entrance to arm s^j , r_c was calculated as the ratio of the number of spikes fired by cell c to the time spent in the arm s^j , in that particular trial. To decode the arm corresponding to a given response \mathbf{r} , the M responses most similar to \mathbf{r} were taken into account. Those M firing rates, included M_0 that corresponded to the animal in arm 0° , M_{45} to the animal in arm 45° , and so forth. That is, $M = \sum_i M_i$, and the response r of the present trial is not included. The probability $\rho(s^j|r)$ for the rat to be in arm s^j when response r was observed was set as M_j/M . The decoded arm was the one maximizing $\rho(s^j|r)$. If there was a draw between two arms, the decoded one was chosen at chance between those two, with probabilities that are proportional to the two corresponding priors. With this procedure, $Q(s^i|s^j)$ is defined as the fraction of times s^i was decoded, whenever s^j was the actual arm.

The procedure was carried out for several values of M , ranging from 2 to 20. Each M gave rise to a different Q matrix. We observed that the fraction of correct decodings (the trace of Q) typically showed a maximum, as a function of M . The M for which $\text{tr}(Q)$ was maximal was taken to be the final one. With this procedure, we obtained a Q matrix for each neuron, for each pair of neurons, for each triplet, and for each quadruplet. In what follows, the results for the subjective distance as derived from the chosen Q matrices are shown.

As examples from the single neuron behavior we show, in figure 5, the

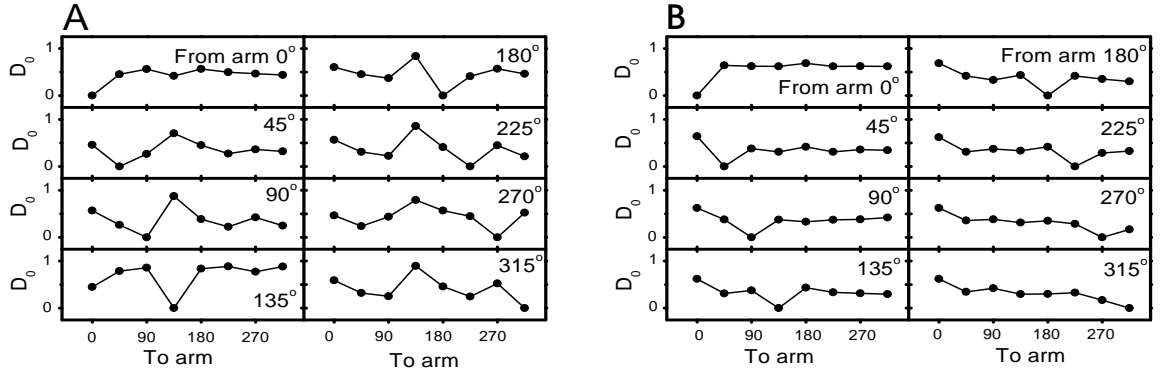


Figure 5: Matrix of distances D_0 for (A) the lateral septal cell of figure 4 (A), and (B) the hippocampal pyramidal cell of figure 4 (B).

matrix $D_0(\mathbf{q}^i, \mathbf{q}^j)$, for the same cells of figure 4. In each plot, the arm i is kept fixed, while the arm j is varied (it does not really matter which is i and which is j , since the distance is symmetric). In all graphs $D_0 = 0$ corresponds to $i = j$.

The plot in (A) corresponds to the lateral septum. It may be seen that most arms are far away from the one at 135° . Not surprisingly, this is precisely the arm where the cell fires most. If a strong, reliable response is obtained for a given stimulus, and if this response differs from the response to all other stimuli, then there is little probability to miss-identify it. Among the remaining arms, the one closest to the one at 135° is the one at 0° , and it corresponds to the second largest firing rate.

In the case of the hippocampal cell (B), the arm that is most far away to all others is the one at 0° , the one where the place field is located. Surprisingly, however, its distinction from all other arms is not as clear as in the septal cell of part (A), even though figure 4 (B) indicates that this cell is much more selective to the location of the animal. The fact is that figure 4 alone is not enough to depict the selectivity of the cell, because it does not show the statistics. The rat in (B) entered 18 times into the arm at 0° , but in only half of those trials the cell fired a burst of spikes. The other half had no response. Therefore, a burst of spikes most probably means the animal is the arm at 0° , but a silent response does not discard this arm. In all those trials when there was no activity upon entrance to the arm at 0° , this arm can well be confounded with any other arm. If all the silent entrances to the arm at 0° are discarded, then the matrix of distances changes drastically, as is shown in figure 6. There, the distance from the arm at 0° to any other arm is shown to be equal to one, implying no mistakes at all. This shows that the trial to trial variability has an important influence on the distance between any two stimuli, even for those stimuli that may elicit very strong responses.

Every cell has a different spatial distribution of responses, and hence, a different matrix of subjective distances. In what follows, therefore, instead of analyzing the specific characteristics of individual cells, the average behaviour is studied.

In figure 7, the average distance of a given arm with all the others is shown. The numbers in the x axis indicate the angle separating the two arms under consideration. Thus, the average D_0 between all pairs of arms which lie at 45° from one another is shown as a single point in the plot. Each data point represents an average among cells (62 units have been considered:

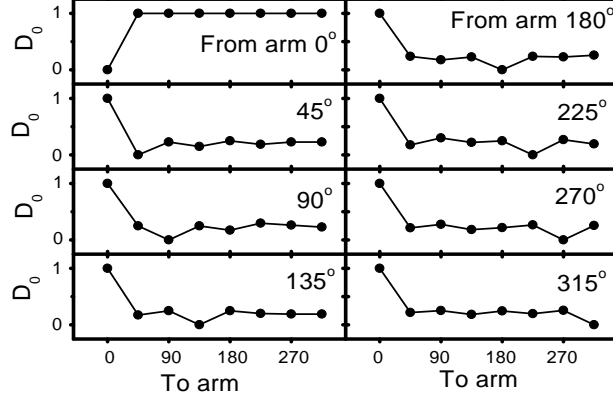


Figure 6: Matrix of distances D_0 for the cell of figure 4 (B), when all the trials with silent entrances to the arm at 0° have been removed.

29 pyramidal cells in the hippocampus, and 33 lateral septal cells). The error bars show the standard deviation of the cell average. In the lower curve, the arm is decoded from the activity of a single cell. As the curves rise, the decoding makes use of more cells (from 1 to 4) recorded simultaneously.

The first thing that can be noticed, is that as the number of neurons increases, all the subjective distances grow. This means nothing but that the representation of the different arms becomes more and more distinctive, and therefore, the fraction of mistakes goes down. One can also observe that the single neuron case looks pretty flat. That is, there is no evident structure in the set of stimuli, since each arm has roughly the same probability to be confounded with any other arm. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the distances obtained for pairs of arms at 45° and 180° shows that they are not significantly different ($p > 0.3$).

In contrast, as the number of neurons increases, the curves begin to bend, showing larger distances for pairs of arms that lie farther apart. The ANOVA test shows that the distances obtained for pairs of arms at 45° is significantly different from the ones at 180° ($p < 0.0001$). This means that if the response of 4 neurons is considered, then it is more probable to confound a given location with a nearby location, than with a distal one. Topography, hence, seems to emerge from population coding, not from the single cell response.

This example shows that the subjective distance is, when read from 4

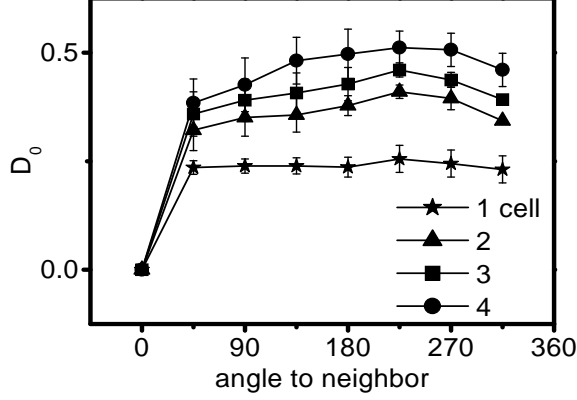


Figure 7: Average distance of a given arm with all the others, numbered counter-clockwise, as calculated from 62 units (29 hippocampal pyramidal neurons and 33 lateral septal cells). The error bars are the standard deviations from the averages. Stars, triangles, squares and circles correspond to 1, 2, 3 and 4 cells, respectively.

simultaneously recorded cells, a monotonic function of the true distance. This indicates that *near* in the actual world corresponds to *near* in the subjective perception, and *far* in the actual world corresponds to *far* in the subjective perception. In this sense, one can ensure that there is continuity, or topography. If the subjective distance were strictly equal to the actual distance, however, the upper curve of figure 7 would have a linear rise from 0° to 180° , and then a similar linear decrease from 180° to 360° . The curved shape of the upper trace of figure 7 indicates that the scale in the subjective representations somehow shrinks as the actual stimulus moves farther away. This, in turn, shows that the system is better designed to make fine distinctions between nearby stimuli than between distal ones. The single cell response, instead, makes no distinction at all between near or far. It only recognizes whether the two arms are the same or not. All these non trivial characteristics of the coding properties of hippocampal and septal cells have been visualized in terms of our definition of the subjective distance.

7 Summary

The subjective distance, as introduced here, is a way of measuring how differently stimuli are perceived. The distance between any two elements may be interpreted in terms of the average performance when trying to infer the actual stimulus, if only the response of the subject is known. In such a performance, the trial to trial variability of the responses to each stimulus is as important as the mean responses.

It should be noticed that the probability of confusion does not only depend on the characteristics of the two stimuli under consideration, but also, on all the other stimuli in the set \mathcal{S} . Hence, the distance between two given items may vary, when the remaining stimuli in S are modified. So here, as well as in many other information, or discrimination analyses, the choice of the set of stimuli is a highly relevant (and sometimes difficult) issue in itself, which should not be neglected.

The distances D and D_0 may have several applications, for example, it may be of interest to compare the subjective distance with some other objective measure of dis-similarity. Here, as shown in section 6, D_0 has proven useful to show that an increasingly topographic encoding of spatial location arises, as the number of cells grows. In this case, as the population of neurons increases, the topography of real space seems to emerge. There are other cases, though, where the subjective perception of certain objects raises clear differentiating bounds between stimuli that are actually near, in the so called *physical* space. For example, it is known that during the first year of life, the exposure of infants to their mother tongue builds up a very particular way of perceiving phonetic information. Two sounds that are physically very similar, but correspond to two different phonemes in the child's language, are easily discriminated. Yet, the experimentalist can design two sound waves differing even more in their physical characteristics, but that the infant cannot distinguish, simply because they are not distinct building blocks (phonemes) in his or her own language (see for example Kuhl 1994). Another example is the perception of facial expression (Young *et al.* 1997), where although all the experimentalist can continuously morph the picture of a happy face into that of an angry one, human observers have a tendency to categorize them into distinct emotions (full happiness or full anger). Our subjective distance would be a good way to quantify these effects.

Another possible application would be to use the subjective distance as the input to a multidimensional scaling algorithm. This would allow to place

the stimuli in a finite dimensional space, and to gain further geometrical intuition about them.

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